

U.S. Senate Committee on Finance

For Immediate Release

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Grassley, Baucus Comment on GAO Report Evaluating SSA 800 Number Service *Senators Say Improvements Need To Be Made*

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) Today, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a study evaluating the 800 number telephone service provided by the Social Security Administration (SSA). The study found that SSA has made many improvements in recent years and is planning additional improvements for the near future. The report says, however, that three problems remain: it is hard for some callers to get through to a live agent, agents do not always obtain the necessary documentation from callers to verify their identities before disclosing private information, and there is no systematic cataloging of complaints of discourteous responses.

In fiscal year 2004, callers sought out agents for 51 million of the 71 million calls placed, rather than using SSA's automated system. However, 17 percent of those seeking to speak to an agent gave up. Although some of these callers may have shifted to contacting the SSA Website, GAO concluded SSA must reduce the number of callers who cannot get through to agents.

Although the accuracy of responses related to eligibility and benefit payment issues is about 95 percent, the accuracy of handling other types of issues is only 85 percent, short of SSA's goal of 90 percent. The most common problem is failing to get proper documentation of the caller's identity. SSA needs to improve in this area so that it can meet its own target.

GAO concluded that SSA does not have a good system in place to document and assess complaints that the agent on the phone has been discourteous. Without such a system, it is hard to identify patterns of discourteous behavior and harder to correct them.

Senator Charles Grassley, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, and Senator Max Baucus, ranking member, requested the study. After the report was released, Senator Grassley and Senator Baucus provided the following comments:

Senator Grassley Quote:

“The Social Security Administration has taken a number of steps in recent years to improve access to its 800 number service, and customer surveys report a high level of overall satisfaction. I commend the agency for its efforts. However, the Government Accountability Office noted that the agency’s failure to systematically collect and analyze data on customer complaints may prevent the agency from identifying and resolving outstanding areas of concern. The Social Security Administration should take additional steps to document specific service-related complaints. Such action would strengthen its commitment to quality service.”

Senator Baucus Quote:

“The Social Security Administration (SSA) has made significant improvements to their 800 number system, but as this report makes clear, there is still room for further improvement. It is very frustrating to wait a long time on the phone without a live person answering. SSA needs to reduce the number of people who give up waiting to speak to an agent. Protection of people's privacy is also critically important and SSA must meet its own target for ensuring that callers are really who they say they are, before disclosing very private information to them. I strongly encourage SSA to take these needed steps to improve their 800 number telephone system.”

The full text of the report, “Social Security Administration: Additional Actions Needed in Ongoing Effort to Improve 800 Number Service”, GAO-05-735, can be found on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov/>.

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